

# Faking the *Afrikakorps*

Contextualizing the Manufacture  
and Trade

in Imitation *Afrikakorps*

Material Culture



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*Faking the Afrikakorps* (revised 2018)  
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Cover photo: members of the *Afrikakorps* surrendered to Australian troops at Tobruk.  
*Australian War Memorial*





# **FAKING THE *AFRIKAKORPS*: CONTEXTUALIZING THE MANUFACTURE AND TRADE IN IMITATION *AFRIKAKORPS* MATERIAL CULTURE**

by Mike Seager Thomas

For many students of World War 2, there is something romantic about the *Afrikakorps*: it had all the style and dash of Nazi Germany yet managed to avoid the opprobrium justly heaped upon other parts of that regime and its military machine. For the UK, this goes back to the lauding of its commander, Erwin Rommel, by Sir Winston Churchill (1950, 176–7), by the military historian Basil Liddell-Hart, who compared him to Lawrence of Arabia (1953, xiv), and by Rommel's British biographer, Desmond Young (1950), and resonates today both in histories of the period, which represent the *Afrikakorps* as blameless and the North African campaign of 1940–43 as a 'war without hate' (Bierman & Smith 2002; McGuirk 1987, 7), and in British military culture, from the Falkland Islands campaign, during which the British taskforce commander sported an unofficial cap modeled on an *Afrikamütze* (the *Afrikakorps*' famous peaked cap) (Hastings & Jenkins 1983, pl. 42), to Afghanistan, where the Queen's Royal Lancers adopted for their emblem a modified *Afrikakorps* palm (Fig. 1). Another manifestation of this phenomenon is a flourishing collectors market both in authentic *Afrikakorps* objects, and—the focus of this essay—*Afrikakorps* fakes.

The study of material culture belonging to the past is a way of bringing it to life. Collectors have additional motivations of course, some of which I will touch on below, but to step through time from the mundane present to a romantic, if bloody past is a powerful one. *Afrikakorps* and related material culture, therefore, have a very special cachet (Seager Thomas 2018).

The faking of *Afrikakorps* material culture covers everything from uniforms and insignia, through webbing, to helmets and heavier equipment like gasmask cases, binoculars and jerry cans (Fig. 2); the fakes themselves ranging from genuine continental and later tropical items described as *Afrikakorps*, through reproductions, which were not originally intended to deceive but were later passed off as real, to out and out fakes—non-tropical items modified to make them look tropical and reproductions modified to deceive or intended to deceive from the start. All of these are common on the market; and all have crept into collections, onto online collectors' forums, into the literature and even museum collections as the real thing. In this essay I consider their nature, the purpose behind them, the methods used by the fakers to purvey them, how to distinguish them from the real thing (and *visa versa*), and how it is, given the considerable knowledge of the collecting community and the free availability of much of this knowledge online, that they continue to circulate and fool. I also consider the part played by the collector/ enthusiast in creating them, and their wider

implications for our understanding of World War 2 material culture; and I consider the possibility of a role in the study of *Afrikakorps* material culture generally for academia. The observations made and the views expressed here, I should note, are those of a researcher into material culture, not a collector.



**Figure 1.**

A modern British Army take on the *Afrikakorps* palm.

Photo: U.S. Marine Corps: Gunnery Sgt. C. Runyon

## **SOURCES**

I will begin with a brief summary of our sources of knowledge on *Afrikakorps* and related material culture. The principal source of evidence for its study is material in the hands of collectors and dealers. There is also some period documentation, a lot of period photographs and lot of anecdote. In terms of understanding *Afrikakorps* material culture, these sources are of variable use. The greatest source of information is undoubtedly the collecting community. The best books are all by collectors (e.g. Bender & Law 1973; McGuirk 1987) and there are also several useful, if not always accurate, online collectors forums (the *Afrikakorps* Forum,<sup>1</sup> the War Relics Forum<sup>2</sup> and the *Wehrmacht* Awards Forum)<sup>3</sup> and dealer websites (e.g. VirtualGrenadier).<sup>4</sup> In some cases these state or we can infer from them that objects were obtained directly from or can be traced back to a particular veteran (e.g. Fisher 2011, 29, 38; McGuirk 1987, 182.46, 183.61 & 183.63) or some other unimpeachable source. There is also some cross-referencing of objects using anecdotal

material from veterans (McGuirk 1987), surviving German documentation on dates of issue and withdrawal (Bender & Law 1973) and by named makers (mostly online). For most individual items, however, provenance is either not known or not given and in these cases it can be difficult to untangle fact from opinion. Photographs taken at the time help but often only in terms of date and general configurations (when, where and how objects were used and worn, rather than precisely what they look like and how they were fashioned). They are good for historians; less so for material culture specialists. Finally, many military and war museums have *Afrikakorps* material. That in Regimental/unit museums can have a good provenance, most having been acquired

**Figure 2.**  
*Afrikakorps* soldier,  
 Panzergrenadier Günter Halm,  
 wearing the *Afrikamütze*.  
 Everything that he is wearing  
 occurs faked. Photo: *Schicksal*  
*Nordafrika*



in the first place by soldiers of the regiment or unit. National collections, however, differ little from most private collections. Objects in them *may* have accession dates that take them back earlier than the inception of faking, donations to them may have an unimpeachable veteran provenance (e.g. *Imperial War Museum*, cat. nos INS7130 & 7131), but many more objects, either because they were themselves bought on the collectors market or inadequately accessioned, lack an interpretatively useful provenance (e.g. *Australian War Memorial*, cat. no. REL28078; *IWM*, cat. nos INS20602–4 and 23447).

***THE INTENTION TO DECEIVE***

The motivation of fakers and the sellers of fakes is straight-forward. A minority of sellers believe that the fakes in their possession are authentic, and their representation of them as real is an honest mistake, but most either don't know whether they are authentic or not, or know very well they are not, and their description of them as such is a deliberate fraud carried out in order to cash in on the very high prices realized for the real thing (Tab. 1). The victims of this fraud are the naïve, the young, the ignorant, the stupid and the enthusiastic.

Among the more potent of the motivations behind collecting is the desire to own a piece of history. The object is part of the historical record; and touching it creates a link to the person who owned it and the period to which it belonged. But there is a lot more to it than that.

Collecting and the study, classification and ordering of what is collected gives the collector a sense of purpose, and thus a sense of worth. Collecting is also a social act, the sharing of objects and the collector's knowledge of them, a medium through which like-minded people are brought together. Members of collectors' forums are often described as 'friends', even 'family', though as with all such groups, not everybody fits in. Because collectors are not bound by academic constraints and are free to be inspired, good books are often written by them. Collecting and collectors therefore can be both creative and socially positive. For some, however, collecting is accompanied by a restiveness akin to that of addiction or infatuation, and in extreme cases collectors will overspend, cheat, neglect their friends and family, even steal in order to satisfy the craving for the next object (Muensterberger 1994). And although some are well-informed, many others lack the detachment and the analytical skills necessary to distinguish the real from the fake, are unwilling or unable to trace their knowledge back to an unimpeachable source, and rely instead on gut feeling or 'authority'—usually another collector. The acceptance of this sort of thinking amongst collectors means that it is very often impossible to untangle good from bad information. The faker knows and takes advantage of these characteristics of collectors and collecting, exploiting the collector's knowledge and the collector's willingness to share this. He uses the need, the craving to touch the past, and—where it exists—he uses the undisciplined scholarship. In this way the collector is complicit in the corrupting of the record by the faker and his or her own duping, but the intention to deceive lies with the faker.

The methods of the purveyors of *Afrikakorps* fakes are the same as those of the purveyors of every other modern fake (cf. Fay 2011, 455–57), the aim being a good financial return for the time invested. *Afrikakorps* fakes made from scratch tend to be those that are cheap to make, such as cuff titles, or that have the potential to yield a sizable return, such as early pattern *Afrikamützen*; whereas modified items include anything available that can be modified and still yield a profit. Thereafter it is a matter of presentation.

Object	eBay (£)	United Kingdom (£)	Continental Europe (€)	USA (\$)
<i>Afrikakorps</i> cuff title	48–145	125	90–150	200–425
<i>Afrika</i> cuff title	30	395	150–270€	350–495
Army tropical tunic eagle		200	280–325	300
<i>Sonderverband</i> 288 patch		500	500–650	
<i>Tropenhelm</i> shield			30–50	65
Officers' <i>Afrikamütze</i> (with soutache)				15000–16500
ORs' <i>Afrikamütze</i> (with soutache)		2200–5000 <sup>5</sup>		4250–10500
ORs' <i>Afrikamütze</i> (without soutache)		1695	2100	1500–1900
Sidecap		650–885	480–750	750–1350
1st pattern <i>Tropenhelm</i>	126–230	450	375	285–900
Helmet with desert camouflage		995		1500–3998
Officers' tropical belt			450–890	750
ORs' tropical belt		250–385	450	350–795
1st pattern tunic with ORs' insignia				2950–5000
1st pattern tunic with officers' insignia			1500	6950
Long trousers				750
Short trousers	51		425–485	
<b>Dealers consulted</b>		Battleflag Militaria; Centurion Military Collectibles; Helmets & Headgear (Scot); the Militaria Dealers; Military Antiques; M & T Militaria	Militärische Antiquitäten Emig; Hiscoll; Militaria Plaza; Helmut Weitze Militärische Antiquitäten	Bay State Militaria; Collectors Militaria; German War Helmets; I buy World War 2; Jim's Militaria; Ken Niewiarowicz; Oakleaf Militaria; Virtual Grenadier

**Table 1.**

The prices of *Afrikakorps* material culture in Europe and the US,  
June 2015

Fakes are declared to be '100% original', a genuine sounding context (and where necessary an explanation of their shortcomings) is invented, and the fake modified or distressed to make it look authentic. A selection of recent eBay descriptions of *Afrikakorps* fakes is typical — 'found while clearing out the attic', 'brought back by my grandfather who served with the 8th Army in North Africa', 'from an old collection' (Fig. 3), 'from a veteran's estate'—all of which could be true of authentic artefacts, but certainly were not true of the objects for sale. A fake *Afrika* campaign title was said not to 'glow under fluorescent light which means that the material does not contain any acryl / polyester... an easy way to check whether a cloth item is

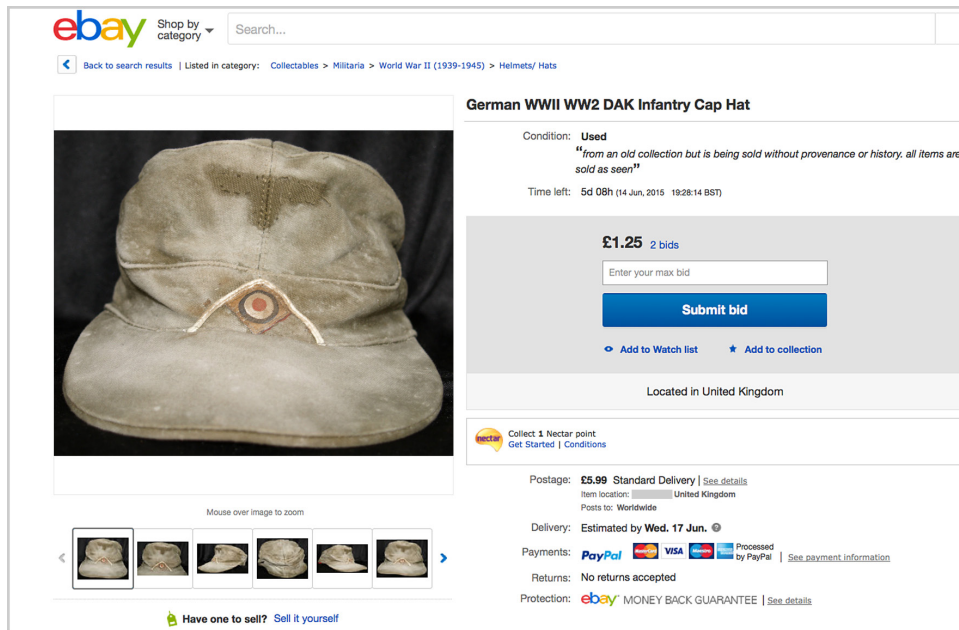


Figure 3.

Fake *Afrikamütze* on eBay 'from an old collection'. The cap has been deliberately distressed to make it look more authentic

period-correct'! Another favorite is 'a rare variant', used to describe bad fakes. I have a fake, bought at auction in the UK, that was accompanied by several authentic, but common and therefore inexpensive items, and a yellowed label in a shaky, elderly person's hand naming the *Afrikakorps*



Figure 4.

Fake *Sondervverband* 288 patch (left) supposedly cut from an overcoat by an Australian soldier. The patch has been sewn onto a piece of (non-German) greatcoat-type fabric and distressed to make it look more convincing. Much smaller authentic patch (right) brought home as a war souvenir by an US soldier. Scale 100%.

*Photos: Afrikakorps Forum*

formation to which it belonged. Deliberate modifications include staining and wear, positioned so that they look as though they were acquired through use, bleaching, 'evidence' that the object had formerly been attached to a uniform (Fig. 4), the application of plausible-looking stamps (Fig. 18) and so on. Anything that might persuade a potential buyer that an object is real, not fake.

Finally, purveyors of fake *Afrikakorps* material culture make savvy use of contemporary digital media to disguise, enhance and contextualize them, playing games with shadow and image resolution and presenting the fakes side by side with period pictures of the real thing. The object then enters the record, is quietly shelved, or recycled onto the market by the duped collector, eager to get his money back.

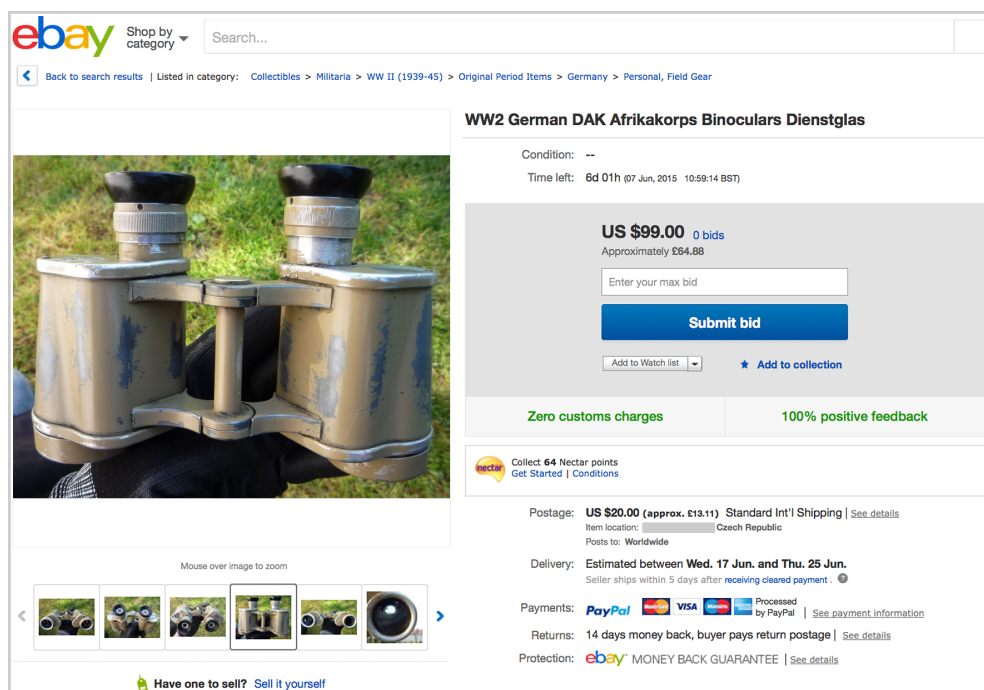


Figure 5.

Authentic late issue World War 2 German Army binoculars for sale on eBay as 'WW2 German DAK Afrikakorps Binoculars Dienstglas'. The dark yellow paint was applied in the factory and was standard, not just tropical issue

## THE REAL AND THE FAKE

*Afrikakorps* fakes come in a variety of different forms—continental and late tropical items described as *Afrikakorps*; reproductions not *originally* intended to deceive; and out and out fakes. The impact of each on our knowledge and understanding of World War 2 material culture differs. Typical of the first group are late war metal equipment items, such as binoculars, which were painted dark yellow in the factory for use in all, not just 'tropical' theatres (McGuirk 1987, 150; Rottman & Volstad 1991, 4) (Figs 5 & 6); and the felt, 2nd pattern tropical pith helmet or *Tropenhelm*, which period photos suggest were not

used in North Africa, both of which are persistently described as *Afrikakorps*. The faking here lies in the description. None of these objects are actually imitation. Nor for that matter are post war commemorative items, which include rings, enamelled pins featuring *Afrikakorps* heraldry and facsimile cuff-titles. But none are *Afrikakorps* either. The second group comprises deliberate reproductions made for films, re-enactors, and display. These are very abundant and include almost everything necessary to equip a facsimile *Afrikakorps* 'soldier', down to his—or her—socks. Their accuracy, and therefore their potential impact on the record, varies from not very accurate to very



**Figure 6.**  
Early issue WW2 German Army  
binoculars. *Photo: Mike Donne  
coll.*

accurate. At the not very accurate end of the range are the two *Afrikamützen* shown in Figure 7. Neither would stand up even to superficial scrutiny by anyone familiar with the real thing, but similar caps are occasionally described as such. At the accurate end of the range are the shorts shown in Figure 14, which could fool the unwary. Deliberate fakes fall into four categories: original items modified to make them look as though they belonged to the *Afrikakorps*; 'honest' reproductions of the sort described above that have been modified to deceive; restorations; and reproductions intended to deceive from the start. These too vary from not very accurate to very accurate. Typical of the first is the painting of continental issue helmets in sand colours *post war* (Fig. 12,

top); of the second, reproductions that have been 'distressed', that is, faded, bruised and stained artificially (Figs 2, 10 & 19); of the third, the attaching of army insignia to authentic 1st pattern Luftwaffe *Tropenhelme*, an unissued cache of which was found in post war Czechoslovakia; and of the fourth, the application of World War 2 German army insignia to post war helmets (Fig. 13), the near perfect reproduction of *Afrikamützen* (Fig. 8) and *Afrikakorps* cuff titles (Fig. 9, bottom), and the design and manufacture from scratch of completely made up items of uniforms, equipment and insignia (e.g. Seager Thomas 2018, 12–14) (Fig. 20). The best of these can contaminate the record to the point that it is no longer possible to distinguish the real from the fake.



**Figure 7**

Two reproduction *Afrikamützen*, made 'for re-enactors, enthusiasts and collectors'.  
Scale 10cm. Photo: author

Irrespective of type, the principal difficulty encountered in attempting to distinguish real from fake material culture is the accuracy of the latter, accuracy encouraged by collector demand and inadvertently aided by the thoroughness of their research and their enthusiasm to share this. For some objects, only the most dedicated student can remain ahead of the game. Also, although the designs of the objects used was fixed 'by order', owing to changes in these, variations in the materials available and differences between the techniques of different manufacturers, and different use histories, colour, texture, stitching and shape vary considerably (McGuirk 1987, 134; Seager Thomas 2019). Then there is the problem of distinguishing fact from opinion. We do have some assistance, however. The real thing always possesses a

set of interrelated characteristics—design, material, quality of workmanship, weathering, dating (derived or inferred from surviving orders or marks placed on the objects themselves)—related to the period to which it belongs and its likely use history, to which, more often than not, even a good fake will not measure up. There are just too many things to get right. Obvious giveaways include the use of petroleum-based synthetic fabrics; the anachronistic association of insignia, equipment and uniform parts; mismatches in or non-functional wear patterns and unnatural corrosion products (both suggestive of deliberate distressing); the wrong camouflage; the absence of characteristics that are difficult or expensive to imitate; different makers marks placed on identical objects and identical makers marks placed on quite different objects; a maker's stamp belonging to a maker that did not make the type of object on which it occurs; misspellings; fresh smells (of leather for example); non-functional modifications and so on. The aim of the faker, remember, is to make money, not a perfect imitation.

The reproductions and fakes below are fairly typical of the koine.



**Figure 8**

Good quality fake *Afrikamütze* attributed to the hat maker, Clemens Wagner, who is thought *not* to have made the army tropical peaked cap. Apart from its attribution, it is given away by a fake cockade and its 'non-period' officers' piping.

*Photo: Ralph Heinz*

### **The *Afrikamütze*.**

One of the most familiar pieces of *Afrikakorps* material culture and a faker favourite is the *Afrikamütze* (Figs 2 & 6), a cotton twill cap with a prominent peak, a false turn-up with a scallop at the front, a pair of initially green, then tan enamelled eyelets on either side, each of which was riveted to a countersunk washer to the rear, a distinct red lining and, after early 1942, a leatherette and cotton sweat band. Insignia consisted of separately applied national eagle, cockade and, at least till July 1942 when its use was ordered discontinued, a coloured soutache or inverted chevron indicating the wearer's branch of service. The officers' version was piped in silver or gold around the scallop and the top edge of the cap (Bender & Law 1973, 193; Seager Thomas 2019).

The reproductions shown in Figure 7, the first by *Sturm Mil-tec* (on the left) and the second by *Adolf Uniformen* (on the right), are loosely modelled on the early pattern other ranks cap (Fig. 2). As already noted neither would stand up even to superficial scrutiny by anyone familiar with the real thing:

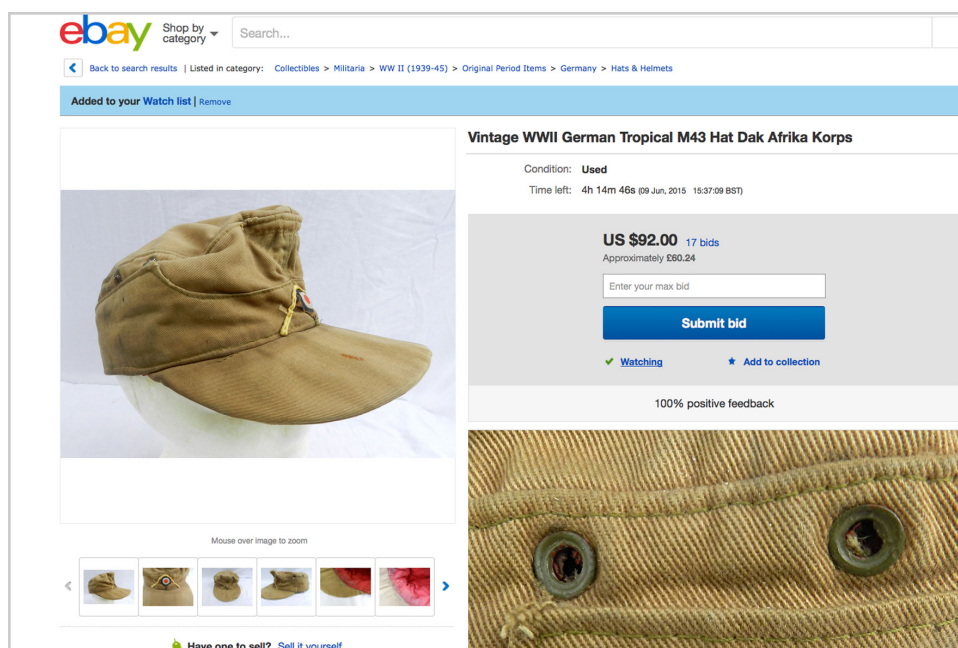


**Figure 9.**

Three of just a handful of authentic *Afrikamütze* eyelet variations (left). The eyelet is one of the key features by which real caps can be distinguished from fake caps. Fakes (right) are the wrong colour (for the date), painted rather than enameled, brass rather than zinc (or occasionally steel), and lack the characteristic countersunk washer to the rear. *Photos: Afrikakorps Forum; VirtualGrenadier*

the first because of its plastic peak, its eyelets (which are too small and of brass) (cf. Fig. 9), a lack of stitching on the underside of the peak and above the peak at the bottom of the turn-up, and the absence on the interior of a gathered seam, running from the front to the back, where, on a real cap the

outer shell was sewn to the lining; the second because of the absence of a red lining and the eyelets, which also differ from the real thing. The other three caps shown are typical of reproductions deliberately distressed and presented with the intention to deceive. Those in Figures 3 and 10 are what collectors would call ‘one look fakes’. The first was described on eBay as ‘a stunning German WWII DAK infantry cap... from an old collection.’ It is given away by—again—the lack of stitching on the underside of the peak, the clumsy way it has been distressed (the exterior looks like it has been rubbed with chalk, yet the interior is in almost new condition), and its made up maker’s name. The eyelets are hidden in shadow. It sold for £62—far too little for the real thing; but far too much for a poor, if honest reproduction. The second (Fig. 10), also on eBay, was described as ‘vintage WWII German tropical



**Figure 10**

Another fake *Afrikamütze* for sale on eBay. Note the incorrect eyelets

M43 hat DAK Afrika Korps’. Its weathering is more convincing. But it too has no stitching on the underside of the peak, no gather running from the front to the back on the inside where the outside was sewn to the lining, and its eyelets are countersunk and painted (rather than enamelled) on the outside. It sold for US\$92—again far too little for the real thing and far too much for an honest reproduction. A much closer approximation to the real thing is the cap shown in Figure 8, which is modeled on an early pattern officers’ cap (Fig. 6). One of several similar but differently stamped caps by a single faking operation, it incorporates period-looking materials and is correctly sewn, but its cockade is fake (embroidered instead of ‘Bevo’ woven),<sup>6</sup> the officers’ piping used for it differs from that used on period caps and it is stamped with the name of a hat maker who did not—as far as we know—make the tropical peaked cap (Seager Thomas 2019).

**Steel helmets.**

Most and possibly all German steel helmets worn by the *Afrikakorps* were of the M35/ 40 pattern, which had an inward rolled edge. This was issued in continental colours and painted a sand colour 'in theatre', the colours and finish varying depending on the arm to which it was issued (Army or Luftwaffe), what paint was available and the skill of and the technique used by the painter. Often the paint was mixed with or coated with sand. Helmets are found both with and without their decal(s) painted over (Figs 11 & 12, bottom), and with the paint extending to the rim of the helmet only or into the inside (Bender & Law 1973, 190–91; Kurtz 2004, 216–28;



**Figure 11.**

Major Georg Briel wearing a worn, desert camouflaged M35/ 40 steel helmet. *Photo: Mike Donne coll.*

McGuirk 1987, 150, 173). Occasionally they were not painted at all (e.g. AWM, cat. no. REL32447). Photos taken in Tunisia show more un- or dark painted helmets as well a few M42 pattern helmets, which had a slightly out-turned 'razor', rather than a rolled over edge. The best fakes are continental M35/ 40 helmets that have been re-painted in *Afrikakorps* colours post war, which, owing to the inherent variability of the real thing, may be more or less impossible to distinguish from them (Fig. 12). For the same reason, authentic *Afrikakorps* helmets, if detached from their original veteran provenance, can be indistinguishable from fakes. For both, clues include paint colour, which may or may not be typical of the real thing, the pattern of wear,

which may or may not be plausible, the relationship of the paint to any rust on the helmet (the later should of course have developed *after* the helmet was painted), and the occasional mark left in the paint by a decal under it.

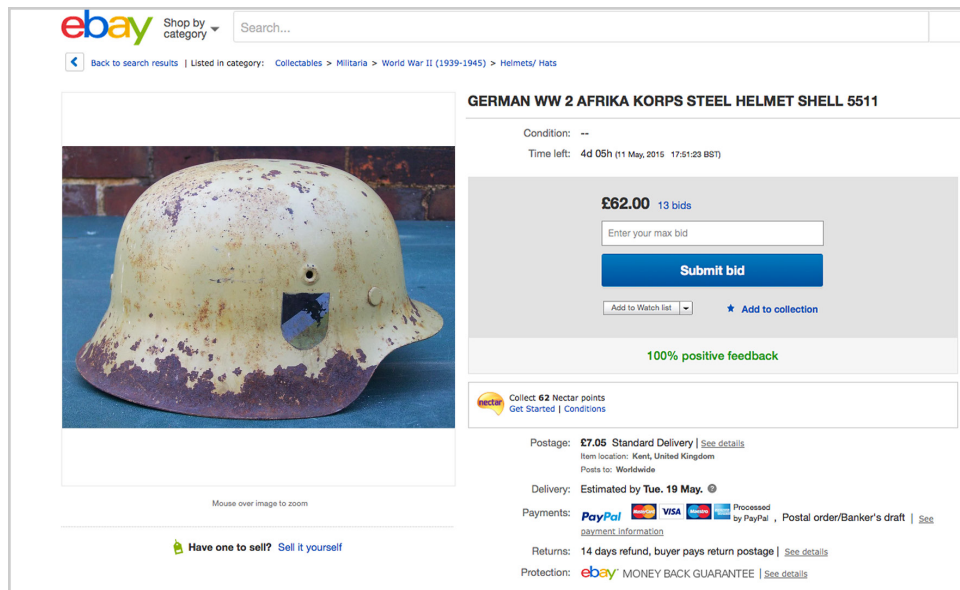


**Figure 12.**

Modern fake and period hand-painted desert camouflage on M35 (top) and M40 (bottom) helmets. *Photos: the Saleroom; Afrikakorps Forum*

In my view the camouflage paint on the upper helmet shown in Figure 12 is probably fake—but I am not certain. It is oddly stained, a possible sign of deliberate ageing, and in places it overlies signs of earlier weathering; the double decals were heavily scratched *before* the helmet was repainted, yet when it was repainted, were masked (an action which seems doubly odd when one recalls that the use of the national colours on helmets was discontinued in 1940, before the *Afrikakorps* was deployed); the name on the interior is naïvely done for a German helmet; and the metal frame around the lining oddly bright. It sold for over £900! The other is more believable. Easier to identify are fakes such as that shown in Figure 13. This one was described on eBay as ‘German WW2 Afrika Korps steel helmet shell [no] 5511’. It is an M42 pattern helmet, a type that rarely—if ever—occurred sand painted in North Africa, and the paint, which is similar to the dark yellow paint applied to late war metal equipment items (cf. Fig. 5), factory applied—again out of the question for the period. The national colours decal is also anachronistic (see above). At the time of writing a helmet of the same type, albeit more complete and in better condition, was being marketed by a US

militaria dealer as a 'near excellent combat helmet with most the DAK paint remaining', with a price tag of US\$849. The one shown here sold for £102.



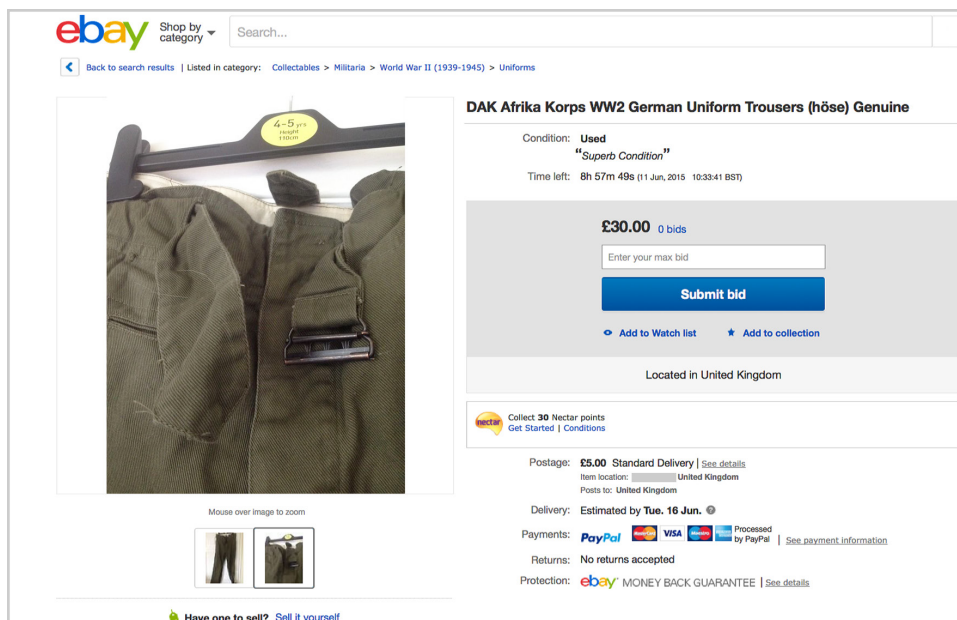
**Figure 13.**  
M42 helmet for sale as *Afrikakorps*

## Trousers

Tropical trousers and shorts were made out of the same olive green cotton twill as the *Afrikamütze*. Both have two slanting pockets at the front, a single pocket at the back, on the right hand side, and a small watch pocket at the front, also on the right hand side. Both also have a hidden belt, with a three-tined (often painted) buckle. The buttons are metal (Bender & Law 1972, 177–8; Kurtz 2004, 94–95, 98–99; McGuirk 1987, 143–44). Trousers are not an obvious thing to fake but, like all other parts of the *Afrikakorps* uniform, they are. The shorts shown (Fig. 14) are 'honest' reproductions, and were sold as such, but the long trousers (Fig. 15), which are almost certainly by the same maker, were marketed on eBay as 'DAK Afrika Korps WW2 German uniform trousers (hose) genuine'. The outside of the shorts is very like that of the real thing, the main differences being the colour and material of the belt, the form of the buckle and the width and stitching of the belt loop (on originals seen by me, the belt is buff, rather than green, the buckle does not have a protective plate over the tines and the belt loop is wider: Fig. 14, inset). Giveaways on the inside are the location of the button holes at the waist, which should overlap the seam between the waist band and the fly, the absence of studs from which the underwear was suspended, and the internal waist band, which on originals overlaps the fly, but on the reproduction shown underlies it. The posted photographs of the long trousers were too blurred, and the view of the trousers too partial, for a full comparison with the real thing to be made, but the buckle is identical to that of the reproduction shorts, and gives them away for the fake that they are. On this occasion they did not sell.



**Figure 14.**  
Reproduction German WW2 tropical shorts with (inset) the belt buckle and fly of the  
real thing. Scale 10cm.  
*Photo: author*



**Figure 15.**  
Reproduction German WW2 tropical trousers for sale on eBay as the real thing. The  
belt buckle is identical to that of the reproduction shorts shown in  
Figure 14

### The *Afrikakorps* cuff-title

The official *Afrikakorps* cuff title (Fig. 16, top) was introduced in July 1941 for wear by German troops who had served two or more months in Africa. It was usually worn on the right sleeve. On it, AFRIKAKORPS was woven in silver against a dark, sea green background, edged by two cabled lines, also in silver. The backing cloth was olive green. Though many soldiers were entitled



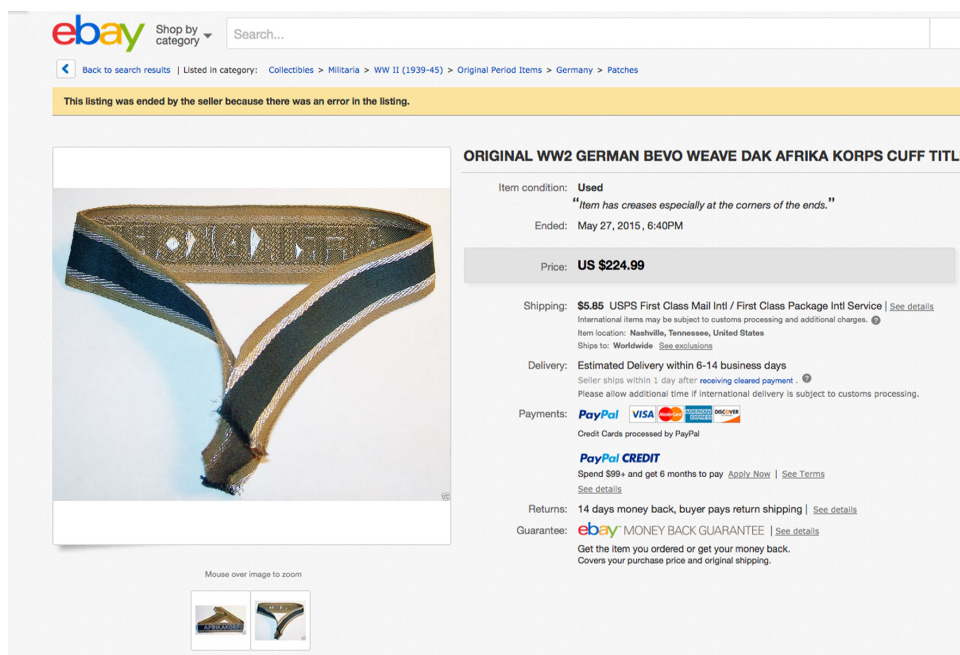
**Figure 16.**

Real *Afrikakorps* cuff title (top) and fake *Afrikakorps* cuff title (bottom). Note the different letter shapes, the differences in the cabled bands, and the 'tartan weave' on the back of the fake. The real cuff title was authenticated by comparison with examples brought home as war souvenirs by British and Australian soldiers.

*Photos: author*

to wear it, period photos suggest that few did. When worn, its outer edges were often turned in and stitched under the cuff title (e.g. Seager Thomas 2018, fig. 2). The official cuff title was preceded by several unofficial variants in white lettering on a black background and superseded, in January 1943, by the *Afrika* campaign cuff title (Bender & Law 1972, 196–8; McGuirk 1987, 154). A variant of the official *Afrikakorps* cuff title on tan, as opposed to olive green backing cloth, appears not to have been issued. For other variants, the jury—at least for some of us—is still out.

Definite fake *Afrikakorps* cuff titles come in a variety of forms. Best known amongst these is the ‘tartan weave’ or ‘diamond back’ (Figs 16, bottom & 17). These are very similar to the real thing, though there are a number



**Figure 17**

Fake *Afrikakorps* cuff title for sale on eBay. It is of the same sort as that shown in Figure 16

of giveaways. These are, on the front, the triangle in the first ‘A’, which is misshapen, the merging of the first and second ‘A’ with the letters adjacent to them, the breadth of the ‘A’s, which are narrower than on many (though not apparently all) authentic cuff titles, the arms of the ‘F’, which are longer, the holes in the ‘R’s and the ‘P’, which are the same size, the shape of the terminal ‘S’, the top part of which is longer than on most authentic cuff titles, the angle and dimensions of the cabling, which are less steep and thinner; and on the back, the ‘tartan’ pattern on the letters, the diamond shape of the hole in the ‘O’ and the very narrow holes in the ‘R’s and ‘P’. Some of these characteristics occur on the real thing, but not all, and not as a group.<sup>7</sup> The example shown on eBay (Fig. 17) was described as ‘Very nice original WW2 German bevo woven DAK cuff title... No glow under UV light’ and was for sale at US\$225. It was withdrawn from sale. But at the time of writing what

(from the front) looks like an identical cuff title, described as an 'original sleeve title from the German Africa corps -- absolutely original! Not one of the fakes that are floating around' is for sale at US\$295 from a US dealer.

The second fake shown (Fig. 18) turns up on eBay UK again and again, described as an 'Original German left cuff, *Afrikakorps*, manufacturer – WW2.' Questions about it from me have been ignored by the seller. The form of this cuff title corresponds with neither the official nor any known unofficial variant of the *Afrikakorps* cuff title. The real giveaway, however, is the 'RZM' stamp on the back. The *Reichzeugmeisterei* was the Nazi party quartermaster and had jurisdiction over the SS, Hitler Youth and other party organizations, but not the army, and *Afrikakorps* insignia would never have been marked with its stamp. At the time of writing the cuff title remains on sale at £199. Any takers?



**Figure 18**

Another fake *Afrikakorps* cuff title for sale on eBay. The stamp on the reverse says 'RZM'. This would never have been applied to army insignia

### ***Sonderverband 288* patch**

Finally I want to return to the *Sonderverband 288* patch illustrated above (Fig. 4). The real patch, which was worn in Tunisia by members of an élite motorized unit attached to the 90th Light Division (and therefore not strictly part of the *Afrikakorps*), was oval and shows a sunburst and a palm tree surrounded by a laurel wreath emerging from a swastika. Between the sun and swastika, is an impression of sunlight reflected on the desert sand. In this version, which was worn on upper the right sleeve of the tunic, the background was woven in sea green, the sun in pale yellow and the wreath, the swastika and the palm

in white. The reflected sun consists of slightly undulating horizontal lines of all three colours. The backing cloth, which was also sea green, was usually trimmed and turned in when the patch was applied (Fig. 4, right). The principal diagnostic characteristics of the fake shown are its large size, the blurring of the leaves on the lower right hand side of the palm, the speckled appearance of the woven background, the very distorted swastika, the backing cloth, which is white and orange (a colour absent from the real thing), and the white thread, which melts when burnt. Fakes of this sort often also have separate cloth backing sewn to them. At the time of writing one described as 'a rare unit patch worn by members of the Sondernverband 288... This example is in extremely good condition in bevo with a cotton backing,' was on sale from a UK dealer for £525.

\*

*Afrikakorps* fakes of these and other types are common. Almost every day on eBay there is an *Afrikakorps* fake for sale and they are common in auctions and on dealer websites, though more on some than on others! In different forms, they have crept into both the literature and museum collections. For example, Dal McGuirk's book, *Rommel's Army in Africa*, among the best informed available, shows what he subsequently recognized and acknowledged to be a fake *Sondernverband 288* cloth patch (McGuirk 1987, colour pl. 23; D. McGuirk pers. comm.). They are so common indeed that collectors have become quite sanguine about their proliferation, and consider 'being stung' an occupational hazard, and on their forums spend much time patiently debunking fakes passed off on the unwary. The fact remains, however, that they represent a deliberate and massive fraud: on the public, on the material culture record and on history itself. Though made easier by the digital market, this goes back to the 1970s, if not earlier, and at the time of writing remains largely un-policed.

### **WHOSE PARADIGM?**

While it is certain that the collecting of *Afrikakorps* material culture generates knowledge, it is equally certain that the market in it, a market that depends for its existence upon the collector, harms the record we have of it. As with the looting and faking of archaeological material, the injury caused is to the very things that give the record meaning: integrity and context. Damage is done by removing material from its source—the veteran—without making a proper record, by breaking associated groups for individual sale, and by diluting the record with mistaken inferences drawn from the wrongly ascribed, the previously unrelated and the out and out fake. The result of this is two-fold: firstly we can no longer interpret with confidence. Even things of which we were once confident, such as the identification of desert comouflaged M35/ 40 helmets as *Afrikakorps*, we may come to doubt. The second is that it destroys the emotional link, craved for by the collector, which material culture gives us to the past.

In other fields of material culture, similar negative effects have been enough to damn collectors and the collectors' market (e.g. Renfrew 1993). Material culture is only to be collected and studied by those trained and approved by the academic establishment, while the lay enthusiast is left to look at it from behind glass.

But who says the academic paradigm is better than the collector's? The academic. And just whose heritage is it anyway? Why should members of the public not own these things? Indeed, is it not possible that their presence in the community generates more interest and more knowledge than their curation in museum cellars? The collectors' forums to which I have referred to through this essay and the 'best books' on *Afrikakorps* military culture to which I referred above, are examples of this. And do the minutiae of World War 2 material culture matter anyway? Who cares if there are a few, or even a lot of fakes knocking about? In answering these questions I would turn the last around and ask whether it matters if someone fakes a Piltdown Man or a Greek red figure vase. For many, the answer to this question is 'no'. Nonetheless years both of lay and academic scholarship have been spent on these things. This is because knowledge and understanding of our past, even when it has no practical application, is considered interesting, important and valuable. It enriches us as human beings. And this applies every bit as much to our knowledge and understanding of *Afrikakorps* material culture, as it does to our knowledge and understanding of human evolution and antique vase painting. It follows therefore that all *should* be treated in the same way.

If these things differ, it is in what they are valued for.

It is high time that we changed the way we think about fakes. On the one hand, fakes are part of material culture, generated by and for the culture that produced them; on the other, they may themselves have intrinsic qualities—as works of art, for example, rather than as the product of a particular Greek vase painter or particular period of Greek vase painting. Today's *Afrikakorps* fakes are a part of contemporary material culture and tell us a lot about ourselves as a culture and should be valued as such. But, like Piltdown Man, they are without intrinsic value. They are neither works of art nor a part of the history to which they purport to belong and can bring nothing to life. Indeed, by compromising the integrity of the material culture belonging to it, they make this more difficult. Nor can they lead us to a deeper knowledge of that material culture. These are properties that are possessed only by the real thing.

Finally, we need to ask ourselves whether we should be studying the *Afrikakorps*, let alone collecting its material culture at all. It is difficult to resist Anthony Quayle's Hauptman Lutz in the 1958 film *Ice Cold in Alex* when he says to his British captors after their trek from Tobruk to Alexandria: 'All against the desert—the greater enemy.' More of us perhaps can resist a pair of *Afrikakorps* shorts. But the theme is the same: war. And even if this one was indeed 'without hate', as it has been represented, there is a dark side to the *Afrikakorps* as well, whose stylish uniforms and heraldry were a part of the Nazi regime's seductive self presentation, who were a part

of its aggressive military machine, and who as POWs, were considered to be recalcitrant Nazis (Fay 1945, 193). Romance and totalitarian aggression: both are integral to our conception of this period of our past, and if we are fully to understand this and our relationship to it, we must acknowledge it.



**Figure 19**

Fake *Luftwaffe* belt buckle hand-painted a sand colour and distressed (continental equipment camouflaged by the *Luftwaffe* for desert use tended to be sprayed, not hand-painted: McGuirk 1987, 170).

*Photo: Townsend Auctions*

### **COLLECTORS ON FAKING THE *AFRIKAKORPS***

Prior to submitting this essay for publication I posted a version on both *Academia* and *ResearchGate*, with a link to the latter on the *Afrikakorps Forum*, requesting comments. As an interested outsider, rather than a collector, I was sure that the essay included factual errors, which well-informed collectors might help me correct. Within a fortnight, the draft on *ResearchGate* had been viewed 62 times and downloaded 42, outstripping papers uploaded by me up to eight months earlier on prehistoric pottery, Neolithic Italy and Easter Island, while the draft on *Academia*, to which there was no link on the forum, had been downloaded 4 times and viewed 23. (As of October 2018, the total number of ‘reads’ on *ResearchGate* is 2,780). Clearly, therefore, the topic is of wide interest. That said, however, only a handful of individuals responded to my request, four forum members and a collector, not a member of the forum, who was directed to the essay by a friend ‘who does occasionally look at it’.<sup>8</sup>

Three reviewers, one (probably) from the British Isles, one from the US and one from New Zealand, said the essay contained errors, and that I was not qualified to say what I was saying. For the Briton and the American this observation extended into to an attack on academic involvement in the study of *Afrikakorps* material culture generally and a defence of the pre-existing collector paradigm:

I [...] asked you how many original tropical uniform items do you have in your collection? In my honest opinion you need to study many more original and fake German tropical uniform items than you actually have, as your conclusions will be more accurate (Commentator 1, *Afrikakorps Forum*).

You seem to imply that Academia is more knowledgeable & would somehow improve upon the experienced DAK [Deutsches

Afrikakorps] collectors on the subject of DAK collecting. There are just as many fakes in Museums (read — probably more) as there are in DAK collections. Some of the nicest DAK items have come out the backdoor of museums into DAK collections around the world. But this is a common thing, not just DAK items are going out the backdoor...

The DAK collecting community has done fine, or maybe even exceptionally well without the PC Academia World's help for over 70 years. The DAK collectors have tried to preserve the original integrity of the few remaining original DAK items & making sure that the excellent fakes of past, present & future are labeled as such. The PC Academia World would not be as interested in that, but would have its own agenda, just like you Mike (Commentator 2, *Afrikakorps Forum*).

DAK collecting and determining fakes is something that takes more than a lot of books and websites to learn. It takes lots of 'hands on' experience & a lifetime of connecting with other experienced collectors and even then there is still always more to learn (Commentator 1, *Afrikakorps Forum*).

There is no need for any academic analytical study paper on faking German tropical uniforms, insignia and equipment (Commentator 1, *Afrikakorps Forum*).

Meanwhile the New Zealander attacked what he perceived as my reliance on collectors forums, one of which he characterized as, 'a toxic mix of fact and fiction, good and bad, and all points between these extremes', pointing out that there is more and better information out there if only I would do my research.

In my opinion, within my areas of expertise and knowledge, your paper contains a number of serious errors, both of fact and interpretation of fact, and reveals to anyone knowledgeable in the subject area of collecting just how little you know about it (Commentator 3, email to the author).

Serious criticisms indeed.

None of the three, however, was prepared to say what my errors were, though in the case of both the Briton and the New Zealander, it was clear that they were not all *factual*. In particular the Briton was offended by comments by me, which left open the attribution—real or fake—of *Afrikakorps* cuff titles in which the holes in the 'R's and the 'P' are the same size (see note 7), a question he felt he had settled once and for all on the Afrikakorps Forum using what is at best circumstantial evidence. In this he proved my contention above that at least some collectors 'lack the detachment and the analytical skills necessary to distinguish the real from the fake'. (The same reviewer also took offence at my comments on collectors and collecting generally, which

he read as a personal attack on himself). More helpfully, the New Zealander drew my attention two important online reviews (McGuirk 2012a & b) that I had previously missed, which enabled me to identify and correct a number of small, but significant factual errors in my original discussion.

Equally serious is a possibility, raised by the American, that in writing this essay I too was helping the faker.

Thanks for pulling the grommet thread on the DAK Forum, could've lead to too much knowledge for the fakers that are watching the Forum. The DAK community know what good grommets are only from experience but the fakers are also experienced in taking our information and producing excellent fakes these days. Still the grommets have not been duplicated to fool collectors yet [...].

I have seen my words used by the fakers directly within days... (Commentator 2, email to the author).

I would like to see any information or photos that I have given removed from the essay altogether. Will be much more careful as to the information given in the future as well.... (Commentator 2, *Afrikakorps Forum*)

This of course is an issue of personal philosophy, not scholarship. Some of us believe in freedom of information and are prepared to pay the price for it; others of us are prepared to sacrifice freedom in order to avoid paying the price.

Finally, a view opposite to that of the American was expressed by a reviewer from France, while a reviewer from Cyprus balanced delicately on the fence between them:

Your work is really appreciate[d]... (Commentator 4, *Afrikakorps Forum*)

This kind of projects are helping the new collectors to spot fakes but as [the American] said it's a good guide for the fakers to correct their mistakes.

On the other hand our public discussions here and in any other collectors' forums, are helping both sides again.

No matter what we do it's always going to be a two-edged sword (Commentator 5, *Afrikakorps Forum*).

Though they have left a sour taste in my mouth, it would be purposeless to comment further on these criticisms except to say that where I was able to identify factual errors, or where others pointed them out to me, I of course corrected them. There is nothing more I can do. They are useful, however, in that they provide examples of collector psychology that relate directly to the collecting, and by extension the faking of *Afrikakorps* material culture. Knowledgeable collectors of *Afrikakorps* material culture will share, want

to share their knowledge, but only up to a point and only on their terms. And this leaves a huge loophole for the faker to exploit. A first task for the academic in the study of *Afrikakorps* material culture would be to close this loophole.



**Figure 20**

A fantasy object. Authentic World War 2 German bayonet etched “Deutsches Afrika Korps”. Photo: the Saleroom.

## CONCLUSION

*Afrikakorps* material culture has been systematically faked. Fakers are thieves. They steal money from the individual and, in distorting the record and undermining the emotional link that it provides to the past, they steal from society as a whole. This is true of the fakers of fossils; it is true of the fakers of antique vases; and it is true of those engaged in faking the *Afrikakorps*.

To date the study of *Afrikakorps* material culture has been left to collectors alone. Not that in this case their work lacks merit—far from it. This essay is a testament to its usefulness. But like other parts of our material culture heritage, *Afrikakorps* material culture is a finite resource, its living context—the veterans who brought it back from the war—on the verge of disappearance, and both it and this should be properly recorded; and collectors are not always sufficiently detached or sufficiently well-trained to do this. This weakness has encouraged and sometimes facilitated the faker. Guilt, however, lies squarely with the faker, not with his or her victim.

The past, even a difficult one such as that represented by the *Afrikakorps*, belongs to us *all*. For this reason academia must play a part in its preservation and study; but in so doing, it must address the proprietorial, theoretical and moral issues that surround it, and instead of pariahizing the members and knowledge of the collecting community, as it has in other fields of material culture research, it would be well advised—albeit cautiously—to embrace it.

### Acknowledgements

I could not have written this essay without the help of members of the *Afrikakorps Forum* and without access to the many pictures posted on it. I would also like to thank the five anonymous reviewers referred to above for their comments, and Allan Jeffreys of the Imperial War Museum for providing access to *Afrikakorps* and related material culture in the collections of the Imperial War Museum, London. The opinions expressed here are of course my own.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> <http://afrikakorps.forumcrea.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.warrelics.eu/forum/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.wehrmacht-awards.com/forums/index.php>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.virtualgrenadier.com/>

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to a member of the *Afrikakorps Forum* for the upper figure suggested here.

<sup>6</sup> Woven on a Jacquard loom.

<sup>7</sup> Unprovenanced tan backed variants of the *Afrikakorps* cuff title in the Imperial War Museum collection (cat. nos INS20604 and INS23447) have narrow 'A's, thin cabling and long and short 'S'. Neither has the same sized holes in the 'R's and 'P', the diamond shape to the back of the 'O' or tartan backs to the letters. The museum also has four olive backed ones, including two with good veteran provenances (INS7130 and 7131). These are identical to the authentic cuff title shown except for one (INS20602), which has a rounder hole in the 'O'. I have yet to see a variant with the same size holes in the 'R's and 'P's with a verifiable veteran provenance or period applied to a tunic and am uncertain of their authenticity. According to the *Afrikakorps Forum*, it 'has always been acceptable among knowledgeable AKCT collectors. Someone with little experience in AKCT's labeled this variation a fake years ago & got this myth started... the construction & materials match other known originals exactly.' The 'tartan weave' or 'diamond back' fake is perhaps copied from the tan backed variant with a long 'S'.

<sup>8</sup> The comments posted on the *Afrikakorps Forum* were subsequently removed.

### ABSTRACT

*Almost every day on eBay there is an Afrikakorps fake for sale. These include everything necessary to equip an Afrikakorps soldier and range from genuine continental and later tropical items, described as Afrikakorps, through reproductions, which were not originally intended to deceive, but later passed off as real, to out and out fakes—non-tropical items modified to make them look tropical and reproductions modified to deceive or intended to deceive from the start. All of these are common on the market; and all have crept into collections, onto online collectors' forums, into the literature, and even museum collections as the real thing. This essay considers their nature, the purpose behind them, the methods used by fakers to purvey them, how to distinguish them from the real thing (and visa versa), and how it is, given the wide knowledge of the collecting community and the free availability of this online, that they continue to circulate and fool. It also considers their wider implications for the understanding of World War 2 material culture. The faking of Afrikakorps material culture is undermining both our record*

of the period of the past to which it belongs and the emotional link that it provides to this. As with other categories of faked material culture, collectors are complicit in the trade, albeit unintentionally, and while their contribution to the study of Afrikakorps material culture is applauded, it is suggested that its study should not be left to them alone.

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